

INTERVIEWEE: Maria Vizcarrondo, Executive Director A.S.P.I.R.A.

Newark, NJ

INTERVIEWER: Griselda Cueto

Grisel. : This is an interview with Ms. Maria Vizcarrondo, the Executive Director of ASPIRA, which is located on Halsey Street in Newark. The date is November 10, 1987. Okay, Ms. Maria, when did you decide to leave Puerto Rico?

Maria.: Okay. Let me start by saying that I was born and raised in New York City. But, my parents... if I can just mention that my parents decided to come to the United States, to the mainland in the mid 1940s. In fact, right during ... just before the end of World War II. And they came for economic reasons. My father was a merchant marine and found it more convenient to come here because you could get more work out of the dock in New York City than you could in Puerto Rico. For that reason. Also my mother, who had been a seamstress for many years prior to "Operation Bootstrap" and worked for some small family that did a lot of manual kinds of sewing and embroidering work, found herself unemployed because they then became more automated and didn't need that many people. So, then she came to this country to work in the factories. At

that point, they didn't have any children and thought it was a good time to make a move. So they moved into New York City in the area that's known as El Barrio. We came many years... we came quite a few years later. I was born in 1951 and my older sister had already been born a few years before that, when they started to raise a family. But basically they came to the states looking for economic opportunities, which were no longer available in Puerto Rico.

Grisel.: Do you ever recall about the experience when they first arrived here? How it was for them? Was it difficult?

Maria.: Well, yeah it was very difficult. I think the one thing that made it comfortable to some extent was the fact that there already was family situated in New York City. And in fact, when they first came here, they lived with one of my mother's older sisters who lived in the Bronx at first, before they got their own apartment. So it was very interesting because they had basically an informal support network. They lived with my aunt for a while and my aunt helped my mother to find a job. So in that sense at least there were people they were familiar with. It was difficult for my mother because she didn't speak any English, but at

the same time they lived in a community where it was mostly Spanish speaking, so communicating wasn't very bad. So I think my mother made an easier transition than my father did. Now my father had a difficult time because he's a dark-skinned Puerto Rican and when he went to work on the docks he often-time discriminated against in relation to

Work. And when actually did get a work assignment, because he was darker skinned he would get menial work to do, and the white merchant mariners would get the better jobs assignments while he was there. So they did struggle with a lot of discrimination. And he also had ... although he later became very involved with the Maritime Union. He had a lot of problems in the beginning with union members and getting accepted in the union because of the color of his skin. So I think if anybody had a more bitter experience... in fact, my father to this day is still very bitter, and when he finally retired, he moved back to Puerto Rico because he didn't want to live here anymore. It was a lot of the racism he faced in his particular position. My mother, as I said, was a little easier because she never left the neighborhood. She lived within it, had her family there and I think the poverty was hard to with but overall she felt, I think, a little bit more support because she was somewhat protected from that

whole experience of dealing with, outside of that neighborhood, and dealing with just society at large.

Grisel. : By the time you were born, your parents had already stabilized in the United States?

Maria.: Well, it depends on what you mean by stabilized. They had lived here quite a few years and also economically they were still very poor. When I was a child, we lived in a tenement building. A one room tenement building and at that point in time there was my older sister, myself, and my younger sister. My mother and father were all living in a one-bedroom apartment, so it was very difficult. Financially, I don't think they ever were able to stabilize themselves in that way. I think the only stability we had which was a little different for most Puerto Ricans was that we were able to stay in one area, in one neighborhood until my mother moved to New Jersey when I was an older teenager. You know, the same location, so we grew up around our family and what not. So that didn't ... we didn't have too bad of an experience. Also, the other thing that happened when we were very young, is that by the time I was five years old, my parents divorced. So that I think affected the stability of the family because then it became a female-headed household. And my mother found herself in the position of having to

go on welfare because there was still small children in the house. And so, economically, we never had any stability. We really had to struggle and we experienced, I guess, the overwhelming situation of poverty, and what that brings with it. I think one thing that I think has helped me a lot was the fact that it was still a very strong unit. We grew up with a strong religious background. We went to church every Sunday. My mother was a very strong person that was clearly the head of the household, and she made sure that we stayed out of trouble. Unlike many youngsters, we weren't allowed to be on the streets. My mother expected us to be home doing homework or helping her with things in the house. Very strong disciplinarian, which at that point, I wasn't too thrilled about. Of course, as a kid, but years later I appreciate it because I think it made a difference of having some level of success and achieving and/ or having, you know, gone the route of crime or whatever. I grew up in a neighborhood that was highly infested by drugs and crime. And many of the young people I started out in school with, in grammar school with, are dead today. They either died from drug overdoses, or got killed in a gang fight, or some drug related argument where someone got killed. But quite a few of the people I started off with today are not alive. So I

think I attribute a lot of my stability or my level of achievement to the fact that there was a strong family support--very strong, moral standings in my household. And basically a head of household that was very clear about what her role was and what our roles had to be in that whole process and I think that helped an awful lot. What was the disadvantage that I did have was that I grew up after four or five years old without a father, which I think, had an impact, long range. It definitely had an impact on us economically because then we had to basically fend for ourselves, you know, as a family. And it was very hard. Those were very, very, very hard times.

Grisel.: So your mother had to go out and find a job, or she just...

Maria.: She worked for a while but my mother also had a lot of health problems. She had heart problem, high blood pressure and whatnot, so eventually we did have to resort to public assistance, to be able to survive as a family. And if you know anything about the kind of income you get from public assistance it really wasn't one that was sufficient to keep us going. It really prevented us from maybe getting a better apartment or

so forth. We were, we lived very much on a fixed income.

Grisel.: The neighborhood you lived in, was it still predominantly Spanish?

Maria.: Yeah, well, I grew up in East Harlem. That was the area that was called, El Barrio. So it was predominantly Latino, specifically Puerto Rican more than anything else. You did have a certain portion of the population ... there were some Jews still left in the area. There was also, since you have Harlem in general, there were black population, and Italians. I remember when we were very small going through the struggle of turf. If you went to certain blocks that were Italian, well, you got beat up if you were there by yourself, unless you were there with an Italian. Just when an Italian used to come into the Puerto Rican neighborhood, you know, he could be in a lot of trouble, unless he was accompanied by someone of that neighborhood. There was a very strong feeling of turf. You basically stayed within your turf if you wanted to stay healthy. That was, everything was, pretty much segregated in that sense. But my own personal experience on an everyday basis was that I went to school with Puerto Ricans, came home to a Puerto Rican

neighborhood. My neighbors were Puerto Rican for the most part. And so that you grew up in an environment, what it did do, I think, was isolate us from the rest of New York city so that I never had the experience of meeting a lot of different people and finding out what they were like and everything. The only people that were not Puerto Rican that I dealt with at any great level were the sisters and priests from the local church. You know, that worked there. Most of them were Irish, and you never really had a close relationship with them because they always seemed to treat you as sort of inferior and whatnot and they had to deal with you. But there wasn't a really close relationship, you know, in any sense.

Grisel.: So you would say you experienced prejudices...

Maria.: Oh, a lot of prejudices and racism, and I realized that even more the older I got. When I realized that basically we lived pretty much like Indians on a reservation--you stayed on your own territory. Ah, the schools weren't that great, you know. The schools didn't offer the kinds of resources that may have been helpful to all of us. When we went there, we weren't encouraged to stay in school. We weren't encouraged to go to college, or any of that. And, in fact, I doubt

very much...also my mother had a second grade education, so she had her limitations. She always made sure you did homework and everything, she wanted you to stay in school, but she really couldn't give us very much guidance because she didn't know exactly how to deal with that except that she would support us in that, yes, you should be doing your work and I'm glad you're in school, but to give us any kind of guidance, it wasn't there, and I wasn't getting it in school, either. Basically, when I went to school I was mostly treated like someone you had to deal with, but you never went out of your way to try to help. I think that if it hadn't been for an organization like ASPIRA coming into my life when I was about 14 years old, I would have never really thought about even graduating from high school. You know, I saw myself possibly by the time that you got to be sixteen where you weren't required to go to school, since we lived in such poverty, I figured well, at sixteen I'll just quit school and go to work and help my family. But then I got involved with ASPIRA, or ASPIRA got involved with my life and I started to see that there were, you know, other opportunities for me. I thought my life was pretty much cut out. At sixteen, I'd leave school, get a job, maybe get married, after that, I'd start having babies and that whole cycle would start again.

And that, I felt, was all there was for me. But I found that getting involved with ASPIRA, they started to talk to us about the importance of school. That, yeah, Puerto Ricans do go to college. I didn't know any Puerto Ricans that went to college, or any Latinos or minorities for that matter. It was, it opened a lot of things for me. ASPIRA started to take us on field trips. I'd never been on a college campus. I'd never left the Barrio in my life and we started to have those kinds of experiences and that started to open my eyes up to a lot of things. And that's what also made me realize how racism was very much involved in my life and maybe I just didn't notice when I was younger because, you know, I didn't have anything to compare it to. Once I got out there and saw there were other things, I realized how disadvantaged I really was or how society as a whole was really keeping me from, keeping me ignorant, so I wouldn't become part of a greater picture or have some opportunities.

Grisel.: How did you get involved with ASPIRA--through your school?

Maria.: Well, yeah, what happened was a friend of mine, not directly in my school ... because for a while I was attending the local Catholic School. And let me just

make a point about that in those days you could go to Catholic schools for \$10 a year. Okay? So it was pretty easy since my mother was a real devout Catholic. She mostly wanted us to go there for the religious part, but it ended up giving me maybe a little better education than the students that were going to public schools. So we were both, myself and my younger sister got a chance to go to a Catholic grammar school. What happened was, a friend of mine in the neighborhood who was in high school already mentioned ASPIRA and talked about it and I was kind of interested and she invited us to go to a meeting one day. We had to go through a lot of changes, of getting permission from my mother because my mother wouldn't let us go anywhere except to school, to church, and home. So the girl's mother said that she⁴ was going to take her and would take us and bring us back, so my mother agreed. I went there and I went to a reception, sort of like an open house kind of activity that they had at ASPIRA. And we started to talk and I started to get really interested. First of all, my big impression when I got there was that I met all the Puerto Rican counselors and they were so smart and they were articulate and they were telling me that they had college degrees. That really freaked me out cause I never thought that Puerto Ricans go to college, you

know, in the mainland. And I didn't even think about Puerto Rico that much. But here I just didn't know anything. The only people I knew were the grocery owners and you know, to me being a grocery owner was a big accomplishment and most of them didn't have a college degree, so you know, it never was part of it. So, that impressed me. The other thing was that it was real interesting to see people that were professionals that really cared about what I was going to do with the rest of my life because nobody had very asked me. And I also like, of course, as a young person, the fact that they had activities that sort of brought people together and you had a real good time. We used to have a lot of fun and at the same time, it had a purpose. You know, it had a real purpose. It almost like opened up something in me that I was waiting to see happen. But I would have never, I don't think it would have happened. I mean some people say that probably I would have, but I think it probably⁶ would have come later. But it gave me a chance to look at the fact that maybe there was a certain potential that I had that could develop. And there were people out there that would actually help me, or support me to make those things happen. So that was my introduction to ASPIRA. I talked to my mother about it, and my mother agreed. She said, it sounds pretty good, you

know. She started to let us go to some meetings. What they did then was that they didn't have clubs in the Catholic schools. They started a home club, you know, which meant they put an ASPIRA club together right at their office center. And we started to have meetings there and have activities and what not and that was the beginning of a very long relationship for me with ASPIRA. So we started to ... I started to seriously think about, you know, finishing high school, possibly going to college, and then maybe I could get certain things. And I really got ... I found myself getting more of an interest in school, that it had a real purpose for me. So, you know, we got very involved in the leadership, the opportunity to get involved in leadership activities and things like that. It became one of the most important things in my life. There was school, church, and ASPIRA. You know, and it had a tremendous impact for me and I started to have my sister going. My sister started to go as well, and a lot of the kids in my neighborhood started to go to ASPIRA. That became, it became a real big deal to be an "Aspirante". So, that, I think, made me realize even more because we did talk about it often--the kind of racism that existed and prejudices towards Puertorriquenos. But it was very interesting. It wasn't one for us to turn around and get angry and

become violent and whatnot. It was about realizing what's there and realizing that you can do something about it. Okay, that you need to, very systematically, methodically, find a way of overcoming any prejudices that exist towards you. The strongest tool that you could have was a good education, because if you're not well educated you not only get out of the cycle of poverty, but you can negotiate the system to your advantage. And no one can deny your education to you as one of the strongest weapons you could hold. That became one of the ways in which we started to look at making an impact, you know, that we could make a difference on our lives if we got an education. That's exactly what we started to do.

Grisel.: So did you go to college?

Maria.: Yeah.

Grisel.: What college did you go to?

Maria.: I started off at Kean College of New Jersey. Well, it used to be Newark State College here in New Jersey. But I graduated from what is now known as Kean College of New Jersey, because we moved to New Jersey when I was, I guess soon after, just before my 17th birthday. So I actually finished my last year of high school

here at Arts High in Newark. And I didn't go to college right away. I got married and had a daughter and about two years later I started to go to college. So I then went to what is known as Kean College of NJ. It used to be called Newark State College when I was there. I got my bachelor's degree in Sociology and Political Science. Then just before I graduated from college, I was offered a full scholarship to attend Columbia University. So I went to Columbia and got my master in Public Policy and Administration.

Grisel.: But all during this time you were still involved with Aspira?

Maria.: Oh yeah. Well, from the time I went to that first meeting at Aspira when I was 14, I have maintained a relationship with ASPIRA. While I was a student, of course, I was an Aspirante, and then while I was in College and Graduate School, I was a volunteer. I volunteered time to work with students or I'd get involved, like when they asked me to get involved in a project. For instance, they did this film on ... motivate students to go to college and it was called, "What ever happened to... So what they did was take students that had been through years of ASPIRA and interviewed them basically to motivate other students

that, yes, look at the background I came from, and I made it so that means you can make it too. So I got involved with them to make that film. You know, whenever I got called from ASPIRA to do something, I would be there. What I also did was I worked as a volunteer for a while at our Passaic County Center there and just help the leadership club and the talent for students. You know, in just applying to college. I did that on my own time. When I did finish college though, when I was finishing up college, I worked as a staff person at Aspira in the health careers area. I was a health careers counselor. So I did that, and then when I went on to Graduate School, as I said, I worked as a volunteer. And I'd always volunteer time. I'd attend activities. Whenever they asked me to speak to students I would do that. And I think most Aspirantes do that anyway. It is a very strong movement in that you see it not just as an agency to provide services but there's always this mentality: we help you, and then you have to turn around and help other people. And that's always strongly instilled within us so that whenever you are asked to do anything for Aspira, it's not even a question of yes or no. It is, when do you want me to do it, and it gets done. So, I got involved that way. I was invited to apply as executive director five and a half years

ago, more or less. A little over five years ago. And I went and jumped at the chance very readily because I felt that this would be a real opportunity to look how we can expand Aspira services. But I also found it as a way of sort of paying back to an organization that had done so much to help me in my own professional life. I mean, it was like, you know, how can I turn it down?

Grisel.: What were the qualifications for your job?

Maria.: To become Executive Director? Well this job is very interesting because you have to wear a lot of hats. I think you have to have background, I think, in a number of areas that would make it a very effective job. And I think the strongest ones are, a good idea of program development, because you always have to be looking at the program and seeing it as effective as it ought to be--is it serving the students? Can it be better? So you have to be someone who has a good background development to be able to make those assessments. You have to be a good fund-raiser. We raise a lot of money through private contributions and grants so that you have to have a good sense of fundraising. You have to be able to sell the agency to people and be persistent in doing that. You have to

have a good sense of politics because in any community-based organization, your survival depends on staying on top of the politics in that community, and the politics in that state so that you find yourself becoming almost a politician in a way. To be able to make sure that you always get the resources for your organization of that you can also have some influence in what's happening that impacts our people. And I say that because we play a very strong advocate role in dealing with issues that my impact our community whether it relates to bilingual education. I mean with the whole dropout issue we've taken a very strong stand about that. There needs to be better services in the schools so that our students don't drop out. We work with the Department of Higher Education to look at more ways of retaining Latinos in college, you know. And all of that means a lot of advocacy role. So you have to have a good sense not only of the politics but you have to be able to have some political leverage. You have to have that as well. You have to be a real humanitarian because many times you have to love what you are doing here, cause this job is not a nine to five job. You put in a lot of hours. You put in a lot of weekends. You have to go through a lot of crisis from time to time and you have to really believe in what you are doing and have that fortitude

to do it, to make it happen. So I think that some of the strongest qualifications, I mean, yeah, you have to be a good manager, you have to have a sense of financial management to make sure that the money is spent right and all of that. And I think that's overall important. Good organizational skills is definitely the case. But I think even more important are those three things I mentioned. You have to be a politician, you have to really believe the mission of this organization because it's a labor of love. You never get rich being executive director of ASPIRA. It's a real mission, a personal mission that you have to carry and believe in. And finally, you have to have a good sense of compassion for your community because that's why you are here. And I think that those are the most critical things in the job description in this particular position.

Grisel.: Do you enjoy your job?

Maria.: O yeah, I love it. And it's funny, we can go through a lot of headaches and sometimes there's days when everything goes wrong. Or there are a million emergencies, and everything else. I think what always makes it worthwhile is when you see the kids at the end of the year, when you have the awards ceremony,

and you see all the kids you placed in college, and you see that Miguelito didn't drop out of high school that year like he said he was going to, that he stayed in school that year. That you are able to help get a scholarship for a student for college, that you were able to help students feel better about themselves. You know, you start seeing that it makes, wherever you do that, it makes everything that you've done, or all the headaches that you go through makes them worthwhile

.Grisel.: How does Aspira get involved with these people who need help? How do you know this person needs help? Or that one? How do you get involved?

Maria.: Well, we do it a couple of ways. One of the things that we've done in New Jersey is that we work right within the schools. We have counselors that are placed in the schools. So our counselors will talk to students and see what kind of problems they may be having, that are educational problems, or, you know, overall problems. And you know, just talking to the students, and it's real interesting cause students are dying for people to talk to them and care about what's happening to them, especially in our urban schools. It's not that much attention, kind of like when I was

in school, nobody paid attention to me and I was dying for someone to say, Maria is there something I can help you with? or is there anything I can do for you? You are always waiting for that. I don't know if your experience was the same, but I was always dying for somebody to care about me in school. So it's not hard to get students interested in what we are doing, or whatever because they are looking for someone to be there for them too. So, our counselors will talk to kids and find out what's happening. They'll make presentations about the programs that we have, and whatnot and we find that students become very interested. And you know, we've been working here for twenty years, and, in fact, in 1988 we're celebrating our 20th anniversary, and one of the things when you've been here as long as we have, Aspira already has a reputation. Students know pretty much what we are about and what we do and many of them recruit themselves. Students do come to Aspira. A lot of kids come in the door here that are brought in by another Aspirante and say, look I found this kid that has these problems. See how you can help them out, you know, cause you helped us out. So students do a lot of recruitment. We do recruitment. A lot of it is done by word of mouth. We really have gotten a reputation for helping kids, so they know where to come.

Grisel.: Okay. Once you get the kid, what do you do to help them? What is it

Maria.: It all depends on what that student needs. They may need help with tutoring, and we may provide that. They may be having a lot of personal problems that are keeping them from performing in school. So, we look at what those problems are and we find ways of dealing with them--whether we need to refer them to a therapist or we need to refer them to other services that we may not have. We'll try to do that. We always also work very closely with the family. We always do home visits and get to know the kids' family and see if there are things we can help out with there that will make it better for the student. We want the parents to support what we are doing so we let them know the programs that we are offering, why we like the students involved in those kinds of ways. We also help out students with career interests. We'll find out all we can about that area so that they know how to prepare themselves for it. We try to develop internships for students so that they can work in areas where they have an interest so that they can see if this is where they want to be the rest of their lives. We do a lot of college visits and we always

have an annual college fair where we bring a lot of recruiters together to meet these kids. And we do career conferences as well. We do a lot of work. In fact, some people call us an education agency because we do so much college placement. We help students get placed into college. We get them the application. We help them fill out the application. We help them out with financial aid forms. We abdicate on behalf of the students with the college. We help them with essays. We do anything it takes to help to get that student in college. Or if they want to go on to some other post-secondary training, we'll help them try to get into those programs, or we let them know what's available and help them as much as we can in getting through the process. So we offer those kinds of things. Also leadership is our strongest point cause that's really why the organization was really developed, to help to develop Latino leadership within the youth that were coming up. So that's our major mission. We do a lot of leadership training. We get students involved in understanding public policy and how that impacts on them. We help to organize students so that they work together on issues. We have the Aspira club where we do training. We have a network that we call the Aspira Youth Congress, which is statewide. All the Aspira clubs that exist come together and look at issues that

impact on the community so that they can learn more about it and they can take action. We want students to become very much involved in the process out there so that they can become the kind of citizens that will have something to say about things when there's problems or politics that are being formed that have a negative impact on our community. We want them to be very involved in that. We want them to be involved politically and socially so that we put a major emphasis in that area. At the same time we are dealing with their educational needs, trying to get them prepared so that when they do become educated, when they do get a degree, they play a very active role and impact. We want them to become community activists-- that is the bottom line. We want them to help empower the Latino community. Therefore, we start training them very early about what's out there, what's happening, and how they can make a difference. And all the time that they're here, cause we start with them as early as 12 years old, they're involved with community projects. We always teach them that you always have to be looking, not only to help yourself, because if you just help yourself you're not helping. The impact is very limited. What we are always teaching kids is, we are going to help you become a better person, but you have to use whatever skills you

have to help at least one other person, or two, or three other people, or speak on behalf of that community at some point, because it will make things better for the community. So the Aspirantes grow up with that, or are groomed in that kind of thinking. And you'll see a lot of them coming back and getting involved either from the political area or whatever. They may be at college, they may be an admissions officer and they are going to come to Aspira and say, I want to help some of those kids get into college. But the thing is always to be self-sufficient and the same time always helping others in your particular community.

Grisel.: Is Aspira exclusively for Spanish students, Puerto Ricans..?

Maria.: Well, let me say that Aspira was initially formed with the idea of serving the Puerto Rican community and that's because, remember, Aspira historically was formed in the 1960's in New York City—that was the first association. And just to mention, Aspira is in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Florida, and Puerto Rico. But New York was the first, started by Antonio Pantojas, who is the "patron saint" of Aspira. It was founded because of the migration of

Puertorriquenos to the mainland and not really having to their disposal a lot of resources, or the situation being very different for them than it was for other migrant groups in this country. There was a really language problem which is not really a problem, but at the time that Puertorriquenos came it was a problem because...remember, when Germans came in the 1800's they came to work on farms and were segregated in other little areas so it didn't matter because it was mostly an agricultural society. Puerto Ricans came at a time of pre-high tech era, an era where you did have to work for people who were English-speaking. So, language at that point became an issue. Also you were being asked to have certain technical skills often times. And they may not have them because most of the Puerto Ricans that were coming to the mainland were coming from an agricultural background or a quasi-industrial background, so the need to speak English and not knowing it became a problem. Not having people that spoke your language also made a problem and the cultural differences made a problem for many students in the school system because there was no one there in the schools that understood their cultural needs, and social needs at the time, so that Aspira really was formed to try to address some of those issues because they saw the Puertorriqueno in a very

plighted situation. What has happened with time, even though the emphasis is still—our major focus is still the Puertorriqueno, because even today if you look at the Latino strata, the Puertorriquenos are the worst off of everybody in the different subgroups in the Latino community. They still have the highest unemployment rate, the highest dropout rate. For the most part, we are still politically disenfranchised. We're not well represented within the political spectrum so that we still have a major emphasis on the Puertorriqueno. But, we also have an open door policy. We serve other Latinos as well, and we have a good portion of other Latino students in Aspira getting served. From South Americans to Dominicans, to whatever. The demographics just lends itself to that. In a city like Newark we might find that even 10% of our population is black that came to our services especially for our career services and help with getting into college. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that minority students in general are not getting the kind of help within the urban school districts. That they need to go on and further their education. So you'll find that happen. But our major thrust, our major emphasis, the student we really go after aggressively is still the Puertorriqueno.

Grisel.: So Aspira just helps the student. It doesn't help the older migrant get a job or anything like that? It doesn't get involved with the older generation?

Maria.: You mean adults? Well, we don't directly have services for that individual. But if an individual like that came to us, we would see whatever educational, maybe they need to be put in a class to learn English, we'll set them up in a class like that. If they have other needs, what we do is that we have a very strong network with all the different organizations that provide every kind of service that you can think of. We have our contact people there so if someone like that came to us, what we will do is then refer them to say La Casa de Don Pedro. They have those kinds of services, or Focus, or another organization that may be able to provide employment needs or something like that.

Grisel.: So Aspira works hand-in-hand with these other organizations?

Maria.: Yeah, and they'll make referrals to us as well. They may be working with a mother who has certain problems. That mother may have kids that are having problems in

school, or having behavioral problems in school, or have been kicked out. They'll call us and then we come and deal with those students, cause we work basically with youth, so we work hand-in-hand. We do cross referrals to each other and in that way we are still offering the services. It's just that we don't have the direct services here to deal with the older migrant workers that needs a particular service. We would make a referral for that.

Grisel.: I want to find out more about you. When you moved from New York to New Jersey, tell me, was there a difference in the neighborhood? Did you notice ...
[interrupted]

Maria.: O yeah. Well, the first difference here in Newark was that I moved into a neighborhood here that was all black. I had always lived in an all Puerto Rican neighborhood, so I think that was a tremendous difference. And just being a young person and trying to make certain adjustments. But what I did find interesting was the fact that even though I lived in an all Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York City, you still had exposure to other minorities like blacks, and you know, what-have-you. You always found a way, somehow tolerated each other a little bit better. And

you got to understand a little bit more in the sense of how to work together and whatnot. So blacks seemed more accepting of Puerto Ricans when I was in New York. When I came here, it was interesting. Blacks acted like we were aliens from another planet. They didn't know how to deal with us, how to relate to us in general, so I found it to be kind of lonely at first, especially being the only Puerto Rican family in that situation. In my neighborhood there weren't many. With time, there were some other Puerto Ricans moving in the area and that worked out okay. The other thing that I think was a clash to me was that I was a New York Rican. I was born and raised in New York, and most of the time when I started to meet Puerto Ricans here in New Jersey, most of them had been born in Puerto Rico and were recent arrivals here. I found a big difference in the way we dealt with things. It was almost like trying to make certain adjustments. You were both Puerto Ricans, but the orientation was different and trying to find a way of relating to one another. That didn't take too long, but I noticed that that there was just the thinking and how you went about doing things was a little bit different that I was used to. So that took some adjustment and also the greatest impact in my life when I first came to New Jersey was that within the first six months of our

moving they had the 167 riots that you may have heard about. The Newark riots occurred during my first year here.

Grisel.: You lived in Newark?

Maria.: I was living in Newark. I came here and my welcoming to New Jersey was the Newark Riots. I had never experienced anything like that before. So, needless to say, it was quite an adjustment to be made when you were in a place where there was major violence going on and the whole experience of being shot at by the national guards, and you don't even know what's going on. . Watching places being torn apart and fires. I thought I was in war. I said to myself this must have been like World War II must have been like. It was like being bombed and everything else. It was terrible. We were in a situation where they vandalized all the stores, so you couldn't even buy bread or milk. We were starving in our own apartments, cause there was no way to get to food, and you couldn't go outside. And if you went outside, the blacks, since they didn't relate to you as a minority, saw you as a white person, so they wanted to beat you up. So you were basically held up in your own apartment. It was a very terrorizing experience. And I saw people actually

getting shot. I had never seen anybody get killed in my life. I saw that happen as well. It had a tremendous impression on me to have to go through that experience. Watching these white people shooting black people. It was a devastating experience when I first went through all that. It was a nightmare that I thought was never going to end. I don't think I've ever gotten over the Newark Riots. I think it was a very impressionable experience. One thing that it did make me feel was very strong feelings about the fact that oppression can push somebody to the point of doing something as violent as that, and hard. We need to work to avoid seeing people being oppressed because there is nothing to be gained but violence from oppression. I think that made the strongest for me in my life, going through that experience.

Grisel.: Okay, you say there were riots going on. So the blacks were against the whites and the whites were against the blacks. What happened to you, the Puerto Rican community? Were you pushed closer together?

Maria.: Well, in my instance, it's hard to say because, remember, I was living in the Central Ward of Newark and there were very few Puerto Ricans. I just felt isolated. I don't know what it did for those that were

living here in the North Ward where most of the Puerto Ricans were. I guess it may have brought them together to some extent. But they were also surrounded by Italians at that point. And they were sort of isolated from that. But those of us that were there during that riot, yeah, those few Puerto Ricans that were there in the neighboring area tried to get together as much as possible, just for survival. We were together before that. Whenever we ran into each other we were glad to see, I mean, we had unity to some extent just by the fact that there were so few of us. When there are fewer of you, you tend to stick together anyway. I think what happened was that a lot of the Puerto Ricans that were there looked to move out. It was just an unfortunate period. In that particular area where I was, was also where you had young, very strong radical blacks that were heavy into the black movement and they, at that point, were not ready to deal with a third world mentality which would tell you that all people of color need to unite. Since they didn't understand us, we were aliens. And their feelings were that we could always pass for some reason. They saw us just as bad as the white people and it was a very violent time towards us as well. We were stuck in the middle of a bad situation.

Grisel.: Why did your mother choose to move to that neighborhood? Why not to a Puerto Rican neighborhood?

Maria.: Well, because at that point in time, you had most of the Puerto Ricans living in the projects where you had to have a waiting list anyway. We had one aunt that was living in that area, but not right on that block, within that area, but we couldn't find an apartment near her. She found an apartment and she took it. That was basically what it came down to. Her rationale for wanting to move to New Jersey, believe it or not, was that she felt that New York City had become too heavily drug and crime-infested and she wanted us to grow up in a better environment. She had come to Newark to visit a couple of times and saw that people had two and three family houses as opposed to a big tenement building of 80 families. And she thought that was a nice environment to raise girls and that there wouldn't be any drugs, that we could go out and live like, I guess, "Leave It To Beaver". We could go out in the backyard and whatnot. I think she did it with the best intentions. I didn't come willingly over here that's for sure. I didn't want it; I didn't want to leave New York City. But being a minor, you go where your parents are. I think that she was really seeing it as a move to something better for us. She found an

apartment in that area. It was a nice neighborhood. The central ward was a very nice looking area at that point. If you see it after the riots, a lot of it was burned down. But you had a nice area and had little stores on Springfield Avenue, supermarkets, and a lot of dress stores and things like that. It was a fairly nice neighborhood, especially compared to what I was used to. Living in a dirty tenement building that you hardly ever got heat, and the buildings were over 200 hundred years old and they looked like it. You had junkies sleeping on the stairs. You'd get up to go to school in the morning and you would have to move aside all the junkies that were nodding off on the front of your door so you could go to school. That's the environment I grew up in. So when you came to Newark, what a lot of people may see like a slum was like Beverly Hills for me. For us it was a step up.

Grisel.: Did you find it hard adjusting to the environment?

Maria.: Yeah. That was what I mentioned before. For one, I missed El Barrio very much, and my friends. But the other thing, as I said, was just the very different environment, not living in a totally Puerto Rican neighborhood where I was totally comfortable and where everybody was like me. I now came into a neighborhood

where I had to try to fit in. I never had to try to fit in before. And that's when I started realizing my English wasn't as good as it should have been. We started to go to this school and just adjusting to being a minority. I never had thought of myself as a minority before. It was very strange. It was a lot of adjustment. I started to get some complexes and it took me some time to get over that. What helped me out a lot was that I had been involved with Aspira in New York. I had a lot of self-confidence, so I eventually got around to feeling better about where I was. But it took me years to get used to New Jersey. It really did because, as I said, it was a total culture shock. A total change in environment.

SIDE B

Grisel.: How did you find your first job in New Jersey?

Maria.: My first job in New Jersey was through Aspira--Aspira Health Career Counselor. My first professional job was an Aspira Career Counselor, and the way I found it, since I always got involved with Aspira anyway, when there was an opening I was asked if I was interested in it, and I said, yeah, sure. So I sort of fell into it because I was already involved with the organization.

Grisel.: So you've always been involved with Aspira, even after you got out of school your first job was with Aspira?

Maria.: Yeah.

Grisel.: You haven't worked outside of Aspira?

Maria.: Oh, no. I worked outside of Aspira. Yes, I've had a lot of jobs after Aspira. But you asked me what my first professional job was when I graduated from undergraduate. I had always had a bunch of part time jobs in college and did a whole kinds of other things. In fact, even when I was in college, I worked part time at the county jail in rehab services, working with the women in the county jail--which was my first experience with prisoners and whatnot. But my first professional job was as a counselor in Aspira. Now I stayed there for about a year or two in that position and then I left and went to graduate school. When I finished graduate school, I worked for the New York City Department of Health and Human Services. Well, actually it was called the Department of Health and Retardation Services. I worked there. I then worked here in Newark in the Mayor's Policy and Development Office and Economic Development. I also worked in the

National Board at the YWCA at their national headquarters where I worked as what they call a development consultant. I did a lot of training. I traveled. I spent all of my time traveling all over the country, training boards on how to organize themselves, working with executive directors of YWCA in management, and fundraising, and doing those kinds of things. I was also in charge of doing any kind of national youth conferences. I used to plan the national conferences for young people for the Youth Division of the YWCA. In fact, one year they sent me Switzerland, where I lived for about six months and I was on loan to the World YWCA office and what I would do was the same kinds of things I did here. I did them over there, but I did them with women from the Third World countries. And I'd go to Paris and Italy and other countries like that and just do technical assistance work with them. So I did all those jobs before I came back to Aspira as executive director.

Grisel.: Now, did you find it difficult in the work world, you know being a woman and Puerto Rican?

Maria.: Let me think that through. I don't want to say a complete yes or a complete no. It wasn't so much hard.

The difficulties I may have had, I think were some I had to deal with from a perspective as an adult and that was once I started to go out there and work and especially after I left the Aspira job. Again, I had to deal with situations where I may be the only Latina in the job. So I had to make that adjustment again, just like I did when I first moved to Newark. I had to make the adjustment and having gone through a college experience where I was one of the few Latino women in college helped me through that too. When I went to college, there were very few Puerto Ricans, and it was a very white/blue collar community, so there was a lot of racism there. And I had to deal with a lot of stuff. Remember, I went to college during those 60s and all that when you had a lot of movements going on to try to change racist institutions. But we still had a lot of struggles when we were in college. That made me become a very strong person in dealing with different problems. When I went to work and I had a problem with a supervisor or something that was nothing compared to some of the things I had to deal with when I was in college. I had times in college where I needed to get escorted to my car because people wanted to beat me up or kill me or lo que sea, because of the kind of racism that was on my campus. I went to school at a time when Latinos still weren't

accepted in colleges. We were treated very badly. And we had to fight for every little thing that we got on campus. We had to be very aggressive about it. I had gone through that whole experience, so when I left Aspira counseling job and went to another place, it was a matter of adjusting myself again to being one of the few or the only one in a situation and trying to make them, having to educate people to the fact that I could be as productive as they could. And my trying to adjust to the fact that I also had to be more accepting of other people and their ways, and not criticizing them because they weren't like me. But, work-wise, I've always done very well. I think one of the barriers I felt at certain points, especially when I went to the national YWCA headquarters to work, was that I was only 26 and the average person at the national board was at least 45 years old, so I was like a baby in that whole situation. But I had a lot to offer in relation to my skills, so I moved around very quickly, but there was always the problems that they always treated me like a kid. I was like the little wiz kid or something. I always felt that I had to struggle to be treated with the same respect as my colleagues even though they put me to do a lot of things and I got to move on everything but I even saw promotionally that I wasn't going to be able to move

quite at the pace I thought I needed because they always saw me as I was too young to get these. They were always sort of holding me back a little bit. So, I guess my biggest problems, you were saying that I seemed very young for doing things. Yes, I've been very young to do some things and I think at the same time that caused some problems for me in places where I was because people always felt that I was too young to be there. Even though I did the job well, there was always that kind of thing like maybe you are moving too fast. That would frustrate me from time to time, I also found. I think life was a little easier for me because I learned very early to be very assertive and where ever I worked, I always tried hard to bring other Latinos in or to bring the Latino point of view in. And eventually somebody would have to listen to me because I would become a real pain about it after a while. So I think I've had probably less problems than most in that situation. What I find, interestingly enough, that I had to adjust to, as executive director of Aspira, is that I'm one of the few Latino women executive directors. It's mostly still men that are executive directors. So when we get together to do certain things, it's almost expected that your role is this and your role is that. And if you become very aggressive about what you do, instead of being called

assertive, they think you are being abrasive. If you present yourself in a way that would be acceptable of a man if he behaved that way, they criticize you for it. One of the things that I've learned in my leadership role is that I did have to acquire certain styles and be very frank and very upfront about things. Often times within our own community that doesn't sit well with people. They say you're a woman and you shouldn't be here or you shouldn't travel as much. A woman should be home. There is still a lot of that mentality. I think the overall perception I had to struggle with a little bit, even though it didn't keep from doing things. There is still a large community that's not comfortable with a woman being extremely assertive and knowing what she wants and being just as aggressive as a man to get what she wants. And I think that the biggest problem it's been in relation to that as a professional. My biggest problem when I was in college was racism and I think it had a big impact on me because people were actually in positions to keep me from graduating or getting certain things so I could move on. Because if I was at a job and I didn't like what was going on, I could always quit, but you don't quit college because you are the loser. And people were often times in the position to try and keep me from graduating. So I

found that much more of an obstacle because I was always struggling to make sure that that didn't happen, even though I felt that I couldn't just sit back and be a nicey-nice student. I had to say when I thought there was an injustice. I had to deal with racist professors who resented the fact that I was sitting in that classroom, and that I was getting EOF money to go to school when another student had to pay for it. And they Resented me for being there. They gave me a real hard time. I had more to lose there because they could just keep me from having a career. So, that was much more of a battle I think, for me. But working, I think it was just one of those things that came up some times. Adjusting to being almost the only Latino in a job, and then being maybe younger than some of the others, which isn't the case around here. I'm the old bag around here. Everybody else is younger. But I think that was the biggest struggle.

Grisel.: Do you keep the same customs as a Puerto Rican? Like your background?

Maria.: Yes, interestingly enough, and I thought everybody did, too. But, I'm finding out that that's not the case. We were always raised to be in a very Puerto

Rican household. Number one in my house, you always speak Spanish. One of the things that I'm very proud of is that my daughter, who's 18, speaks Spanish just as well as English. I raised her with the style that my mother raised her as far as culture. I raised her, you should know, to know Spanish well and to be proud to be Puertorriquena. Always taught her to have a lot of Puerto Rican pride. We were raised to feel that if you weren't Puerto Rican, you had to feel sorry for the rest of the world that wasn't Puerto Rican because you were a very special person being Puerto Rican. We maintain all the customs. I'm probably one of the few people I know that celebrates "El dia de Los Reyes" in their house instead of Christmas and New Years. I have a Reyes festival every year. Everyone comes to my house cause I'm the only one who does it. In my house you eat rice and beans. I'm very strongly rooted in my culture, even though I was born here. And probably my mother did it more because we were born here and was probably concerned that we would become so assimilated that we would lose touch with it. My daughter comes running home cause she wants her rice and beans. That's just the way we were raised. Yeah, I'd say that the Puerto Rican culture is still very much a part of my existence. It's just engraved in me and I hope my

daughter, if she ever has children, will do the same thing.

Grisel.: Tell me about your family. Are you married?

Maria.: Yeah, I'm married. Well, I was divorced from my daughter's father when we were very young, before I went to college. But I remarried about six years ago. I'm married to un Dominicano who is an attorney. So I remarried about six years ago. But from the time my daughter was two years old until she was about 12, when I got married again, I was a single parent. I raised my daughter on my own. We don't have any children together, my husband and I. He has a daughter from a first marriage also. It's been basically myself , my husband and my daughter, that I've raised. I have two other sisters, an older sister and a younger sister. My mother is still alive and my father still livings in Puerto Rico. As I said, my husband is an attorney. He was also raised in New York City, but he was born in Santo Domingo, in Hato Mayor in the Dominican Republic and lived here since the time he was 8 years old. He went to Rutgers University. He went to Rutgers Law School. I don't anticipate having any more children. I raised one that was enough. The Vizcarrondo side of me, Vizcarrondo is my maiden name.

My married name is DeSoto. That's why I use Vizcarrondo de Soto. My mother's family, what's left of the family is in New York City. There're very few left. My mother is in her 70s now and not much of the Vizacarrondos are real interesting though because they're all in Puerto Rico. They've always lived around the same area. Around Carolina and Loiza. In fact, the high school in Carolina is named Vizcarrondo High School because my family has been there since the inception of Carolina. My grandfather is very well known in Puerto Rico although he died a few years ago. Afaltunato Vizcarrondo. He wrote a lot of poetry about the black experience in Puerto Rico. I don't know if you ever heard that poem, "Y tu, abuela, adonde estas". Afaltunato Vizcarrondo was a renown author of the black experience in Puerto Rico. So I come from the Vizcarrondo side in Puerto Rico. They have a renowned history of being very much involved in the arts. They have always been community activists, involved in the politics of the island. The Vizarrondo name has a lot of meaning where people can't even spell it here; it also has a lot of meaning in Puerto Rico. I've always been raised to be very proud of my heritage in that part too. And that's why I never stopped using my name even when I got married. To me, it means a lot to carry that name, and I feel that I

have a certain tradition of being very involved as my family was. It's a reputation to be upheld in the process.

Grisel.: Have you been back to Puerto Rico?

Maria.: I used to go to P.R. As poor as we were, I used to go to Puerto Rico every summer when I was coming up. When I was pregnant with my daughter, I went to Puerto Rico so that she could be born in Carolina. I said, I was born in New York City. If she was born here too, that makes her twice removed and I was real concerned about that. So I actually went, cause at that point my husband, my daughter's father was in Viet Nam during the time I was pregnant. So I said, let me go to Puerto Rico. I stayed with my father. I went when I was about three months pregnant and I stayed there a month or two after she was born. She was born in Carolina in the same hospital, and I was assisted by the same nurse who helped bring my father into the world. She was born in a hospital. So my daughter got a chance to be born where the other Vizcarrondos had been born, in Carolina.

Grisel.: Have you ever stopped to think what your life would have been like if you would have never moved here and you had been born there?

Maria.: No, I can't imagine what it would have been like. I would think that I would be as proud of my whole heritage as I was. I don't know if the opportunities would have been the same. I'm not quite sure of what was happening as far as the great social movements of the 60s in Puerto Rico. Would I have had a chance to go to college? And do a lot of things that were there? I was there during my pregnancy. I never lived there for that long a period of time. I said to myself, maybe this is a good place for opportunity. But even then it was very difficult to even find a job. So I don't know if things would have been the same, if the same opportunities would have presented themselves. It would be interesting to think about but I don't quite know what would have happened. I imagine they'd be very different lives.

Grisel.: Do you ever plan on moving to the island?

Maria.: To be very honest with you, I don't think I would, unless I was getting ready to retire. I had a nice little bundle put aside so I could live comfortably. Right now I would still find it very difficult because there is a very different perception of life between the mainland Puerto Rican and the island Puerto Rican.

A lot of it has to do with the fact that we here have had to deal with so much discrimination and are considered a minority. We have a different mind set of how we look at things politically, socially, and economically and personally. That you may not face being in Puerto Rico where you are coming from the majority. They have a different mentality. I think you can see that even on college campuses with island Puerto Ricans who come to school. I remember we had some island Puerto Ricans in school with me. They saw things very differently than we did, and they couldn't see why we made such a big fuss. Or why we were so angry about things. For my attitude, the way I am, it's very hard for me to live in PR because I find there are still a lot of problems with women being very assertive and being very independent. It's still criticized. You have to cushion it a lot and I don't think I could survive with that. Economically, it's very insecure to live in Puerto Rico right now. I don't think that during my professional years, unless I had a million dollars waiting for me or something. It's just the lifestyles. I think the lifestyle is different. I'm used to a faster pace. I'm used to a lot more options. I think those would be tremendously limited in Puerto Rico. I don't think I deal with that very well. Like I said, I think it's some

Place I'd like to retire to one day but not right now. I got--there's too many things going on here that I think are very important I'd like to be part of. I don't see myself going back any time between now and when I'm 65.

Grisel.: What are your plans for the future?

Maria.: I'd like to try a few more things. I'd like to go out and work on my dissertation, get a Ph.D. I'd like to work in the corporate sector at some point, cause I think there are some contributions I can make for our community being involved there. I may want to write a book. I'd like to first, and foremost, expand my educational experience a little bit more. I'd like to try something totally different. I like a challenge. I haven't worked in the corporate sector and it may be something I want to try--for a while. I change things every couple of years just to do something else. I'll never be one to be very comfortable. I doubt I'll ever retire with a 65 years old watch from any place. Every five or six years, I just make assessments of where I am, where I need to go. If I look that there is an area where I'd probably get another challenge, then there I'd go. I'm leaving it pretty much open. I don't think I'll ever run for office again.

Grisel.: Tell me about that.

Maria.: Yeah, in 1984, I ran for County Freeholder here in Essex County. I've been involved for many years in the political process of the board of registration. I've worked on campaigns for different people. So I got to the point that I said maybe I should run for office. One of the reasons I wanted to run was that I'd seen that in the County of Essex you never had a Latino Freeholder. I thought that was a real problem especially if one of the districts that is part of the freeholder make-up is one that is predominantly Latino. And I think that community should be represented within the policy-making body of whatever the entity is. So I ran. A couple of people had suggested that I also do it. So I was convinced to run and did. We didn't win but one of the things that it did was that they saw Latinos really came out to vote. We got 36% of the vote in the primary where normally you would only get 3% of the vote. So, we showed that we had a very strong standing. It clearly showed the politicians that it's a matter of time before Latinos start making an entrance in there because they are a significant vote. It made them realize that they can't take the Latino vote for granted, and now most of the politicians that you see in Essex County and this area

will try to involve the Latino community in what they're doing because they can't ignore it anymore. So, even if I didn't win an office it was a victory for the community. We came out of that election with a lot of respected and recognition that wasn't there before. But I'll never do it again because you are totally dedicated to a campaign. It's a 24-hour job. It's very draining on you emotionally and physically. There's always that problem of having to raise a lot of money. It was really difficult time. My family had to make a lot of sacrifices. I never saw my daughter for six months. It just meant a lot of personal sacrifices that I don't think in the long run as a person it ended up being worth it to me. I think we gained a lot of things, but me personally, I will not do it again. I would support others and be involved with their campaign. But it's very hard being a candidate because the other thing is if you get elected you are in the public eye all the time. That could be very draining on people. That can be a very draining experience to know that everything you do is public knowledge. And you never have any privacy. And at some point you need your own time. I'm in the public eye a lot at this job, but I can also still control what I want to be involved in and not involved in. I think Latino public officials have a very

difficult time in that they become totally involved in the whole. In that particular position they have to be the savior for everything, and that's a tremendous burden when you are expected to rid the community of all its problems. One person can't do that. I think our community still can't understand it. So, when you get somebody elected, you really put them under a lot of pressure. People elect a Latino into office they expect them to work miracles. It's hard. Hopefully, we opened doors for future generations to try it and I'll support it 100%, but I won't be the person.

Grisel.: Did your family support you?

Maria.: O yeah. I'm really lucky to have a husband that's extremely supportive of everything I do, even though it was draining on them. I'm very lucky to have a family that follows me blindly when I want to do something. They say, if you are doing it it must be right and we'll go along with it. It's a unique situation. It's also the reason why I took so long to marry again because it's very difficult to find a man. Cause women are expected to go along with the program for her husband, but it's very difficult for a man to do that for the wife. It took me 12 years to find somebody that could live with that kind of thing, and

work with it and support it. So, I think I'm very
fortunate.

END OF TAPE